

DeVault Tavern
North Tennessee Route 81
Leesburg
Washington County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-217

HABS
TENN,
90-LEES,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DeVAULT TAVERN

HABS No. TN-217

Location: Leesburg, Washington County, Tennessee. Northwest of Jonesboro on North Tennessee Route #81, left at Old Stage Road, two miles.

Present Owner and Occupant: Mrs. E.G. DeVault, Route #6, Jonesboro (Leesburg), Tennessee.

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: The DeVault Tavern, built 1819-1821, is a well preserved and excellent example of an early 19th century stagecoach inn and tavern. This stop served the route tying Knoxville and Nashville with the economic and political centers of the north and east. Among its many guests were the three presidents - Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk, and Andrew Johnson. The building still has its original wood screen bar and every bedroom is reached by a separate stairway. Notable is the building's exquisite woodwork - its porch, cornice, main stairway, and mantelpieces, and its original wrought iron strapwork. It has remained in the family to this day.

Part 1 HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1819; completed 1821.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

Legal Description: Part of a tract of land bounded on the north by Main Street, on the east by Lot 24, on the west by 2nd Street and Lot #23 according to the original town plot of Leesburg (Deed Bk. 8, p. 2), Washington County, Tennessee

The following is a complete chain of title: The town of Leesburg was established in 1799 on the lands of M. Fraker, A. Campbell, and J. Campbell. The town consisted of 90 acres and was laid off in lots (Plot Deed Bk. 8, p. 2) according to Agreement of 5/4/1799. Much of the town property was purchased by George Payne and Thomas Brabson.

Bk. G, P. 577, 5/26/1800

M. Fraker to George Payne and Thomas Brabson, that part of Lot #24 that adjoins Lot #25 for \$100.00. 1/4 acre Recorded 10/19/1800.

- Bk. G, p. 558, 5/26/1800
George Fraker to George Payne to Thomas Brabson, 1/2 of Lot #24 that lies adjoining Lot #23. 1/4 acre for \$300. Recorded 10/19/1800.
- Bk. 17, p. 4, 7/19/1819
Thomas Brabson to Valantine and Frederick Davault. All of Washington County for \$5,700. A tract of land on waters of Big Limestone Creek. Town of Leesburg adjoining the meeting house Lot. 427 acres. Recorded 12/27/1819.
- Bk. 17, p. 126, 5/29/1820
Michael Fraker of Greene County to F. Davault, for \$12. Lot #39 on north side of Main Street 100 feet from the Post at the head of the spring, "including the blacksmith shop built by Governor Marsh". Recorded 1/3/1821.
- Bk. 17, p. 126, 9/3/1820
George F. Gillespie to F. Davault, for \$40. Lot in Leesburg #68 "being the lot occupied by the said Sussannah Johnston at the time of her death". Recorded 1/3/1821.
- DeVault Family Papers - 9/8/1824
George Payne of Frederick Company, Maryland Quit Claim to F. DeVault for \$150, 1/4 acres (Lot #24)

Leesburg and 1/2 acre lot adjoining the same "which lots include the house formerly designated by being named Carmichaels Old House which properly was purchased by the said G.W. Payne and Thomas Brabson from Joseph Shields". Recorded 12/18/1817.

1836 - Quit claim from Valantine to F. DeVault for his interest in the Brabson farm on which the tavern sets. The property has continued to remain in the hands of the family.

4. Original plans and construction: Bricks were made from local clay and dried one year before using. Frederick DeVault made all wrought iron metal work himself, a skilled blacksmith. He is supposed to have supervised the erection of the house. The foundations were cut from nearby limestone.
5. Alterations and additions: An addition c. 1827 to the rear of the house on the east side gave the appearance of a salt-box.

1880 - present kitchen converted to kitchen

1912 - main upstairs bedroom had door cut to link it with bedroom at the rear.

1922 - rear center brick court covered with concrete.

Modern installations (bathroom, etc.) made in last twenty years.

- B. Historical Context: The 1797 Knoxville Gazette announced a meeting in the new town of Washington to form a Manumission Society to prohibit slavery. The name of the place was later changed to Leesburg in honor of Leroy Taylor, a prominent citizen and the carver of the State Seal of Tennessee. In 1799 the town was established by Act of Legislature. The community grew up around the Great Stage Road, the only link of transportation and communication with all points north from the west and lower Tennessee county. There was always a need for accommodations here and several taverns preceded DeVaults. Before the year 1803 one was called "The Sign of the Bear." The chief stops along this line were Nashville and Abington, Virginia. Towns along the route included Blountville, Jonesboro, Greeneville, Newport, Dandridge, and Knoxville.

In 1819 the two DeVault brothers, Valantine and Frederick, bought a tract of land adjoining Leesburg on which Frederick built a house and engaged in smithing. Soon however he took on the tavern business and offered perhaps the best accommodations to travelers between Greeneville and Jonesboro. This tavern and inn stands today little changed from its earliest years and offers one of the best illustrations of a county tavern of the Southeast extant.

Frederick was the ninth son of Henrich and Catherine Marie. It has come to be spelled DeVault but there were many early spellings. His father usually referred to themselves as DeWald but Frederick most commonly used the spelling Davault.* Henrich and wife were from the Palantine. They came to America in 1766, and established themselves in Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania. This county was established in 1764 and was mainly populated by Germans. Henrich in time became a large landholder. He held two large tracts in Tennessee.

At Henrich's death in 1817, he willed "all that plantation and tract of land which I have purchased from a certain John Been lying in Washington County in the State of Tennessee containing six hundred and thirty-seven acres."

Frederick was born near Hanover on May 5, 1778. It is not known when either he or his brothers came to Tennessee but they probably settled on their father's land at first. On November 3, 1799 Steiner and Schweinitz noted in their journals that they crossed a ford which a German carried them through. This referred to the brother of Frederick and Valantine, Peter, who operated a tavern several miles north of their tavern in Leesburg. In 1803 Frederick married Margaret Range, sister-in-law of brother Valantine, in Washington County. He was a Lutheran, she a Presbyterian. From 1803-1818 it is thought that they all lived near DeVault's Ford on the Watauga River.

* DeVault has become the traditional spelling.

After inheriting the property from their father, Valantine and Frederick moved to Leesburg, built a house, soon converted it to a tavern, enlarged it and engaged in smithing, all of which to take advantage of the stage road trade. The first evidence of the DeVault's Tavern business is an 1825 bill for feeding three horses for 126 days at \$20 per day (\$75.60) and boarding for 18 weeks at \$22.

Among the original documents in the family papers is an 1827 tavern bond for \$200 signed by Governor William Carroll and an 1828 bond signed by Governor Sam Houston. The 1827 bond, signed August 9, 1827 read as follows: "that the said DeVault shall keep a decent and orderly house for the term of twelve well furnished with all things necessary for the accommodation of travellers."

A bill dated 1847 reveals that the cost for a man and horse overnight was 50¢, and drivers paid \$1.25 board per week. The tavern made a good deal of its profits off the sale of tobacco and liquor. Whiskey was 50¢ a gallon. Breakfast was 9¢, dinner 10¢, lodging alone was 6¢, brandy was 8 1/2 ¢ per half-pint, rum was 6¢ a half-pint, and a half-pint of wine was 20¢. A bill of purchase included \$1.00 for 33 lbs. of beef.

Many important guests stayed over night here. A list included, among many others, Presidents Jackson, Polk and Johnson, and Bancroft the historian. For two years the newspapers of Andrew Johnson were delivered here, and the front porch was the podium for many a politician. The house was well suited to an inn. Each bedroom had its own stairway, and no two connected. The small bar with wooden screen remains intact.

The other DeVault brothers, Peter and Henry, also worked in the tavern. Later, they left to go to Missouri. They became well known there as carpenters and landowners. Peter built and operated a tavern reputedly very similar to that of his father's in 1828 on Soon's Lids Road, near Florence, Montgomery County, Missouri. It was demolished for the improvement of highway in recent years. Henry donated the site for the county seat at Danville, Missouri.

Frederick DeVault died August 9, 1847 at the age of 70. He left ten children. The sixth was John who inherited the tavern. John was born July 30, 1819 in Tennessee and died 1882. His son F. Russell DeVault inherited the house from him and it has continued to remain in family control since. This family continuity has been important for DeVault's Tavern. Family pride and protection have preserved with few changes an impressing example of the early 19th century stagecoach inn. In the family papers and collections are many old cookbooks, newspapers, etc. A diary of daily work orders for October, 1835, and a ledger for 1859 are interesting. Also a ledger for 1814-1826 is extant but the text of the book has been pasted over with a collection of newspaper political articles. There are also calculations and drawings of the eclipse of the sun of May 15, 1836. A daily weather

record exists for the years 1871-1896. There is a ledger for Buchanan and DeVault's (John) general store for 1849-50. A tavern ledger including parts of the years between 1857-1897, a student's writing and poetry book with drawings dated 1847, and several sketches by John DeVault are also fascinating. A \$60 currency note on the U.S. Government dated 1779 is among the collection.

Taverns and inns remained in business to some degree after the Civil War but the coming of the railroad resulted in decline of stage and road travel. In 1850 the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad was active and it completely bypassed Leesburg. As time went on travelers and visitors decreased. The town of Leesburg actually grew smaller. In 1887 Goodspeed commented "the place never attained much importance, and has now well nigh disappeared." Yet the tavern continues to stand to this day. It continued to serve the community as a post office well into this century, but the secret to its preservice has been the lack of development of Leesburg and continued family ownership.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: An early 19th century stagecoach inn and tavern with some Federal elements.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, due to constant maintainance.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: A near-square structure, the tavern measures approximately 35' x 45'. It is two stories in height. The facade and side elevations are all five bays wide. There are a 2-story original ell and a 1-story ell addition, which was built ca. 1827 by Frederick Davault.
2. Foundations: Coursed limestone ashlar foundation.
3. Walls: Brick bearing walls. Flemish bond on front facade.
4. Structural system, framing: Brick bearing walls. Sawed timber truss.
5. Porch: A pedimented two-story porch occupies the central part of the facade. The columns have an interesting turned design. The boards trimming the second floor porch floor and third floor ceiling have "segmental arch" heads. The cornices on the first and second floors have millwork. The pediment is surrounded by mutules and millwork.

6. Chimneys: Outside-end brick chimneys; all rise high above the roof.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main door has an exquisite Federal fanlight. The second floor porch door is the same, but is smaller.
 - b. Windows: Double-hung wood sash windows; 6-over-9 lights in second floor and 9-over-9 lights in first floor.
8. Roof: Gable roof with hipped south end; ridge parallel to facade. Covering is standing seam metal.

The cornice is decorated with millwork and mutules, which are similar to those on the porch.

C. Description of Interior:

General description: The old tavern has a L-plan. The handsome interior, largely intact, includes the original wood Federal mantles, paneled doors (some artificially grained), chairrailings, and door and window architraves. Each original bedroom is equipped with a separate box stairs. There is an original bar room with an original wood screen. The main stairs is a two-flight, open-well type, with scrollwork, turned balusters and newell, and a paneled wainscoting.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

DeVault Family papers. In the possession of Mrs. E.G. DeVault, Route #6, Jonesboro, Tennessee.

Washington County Deed references. (Place and address of repository not given).

Mathews, Maxine. "Old Inns of East Tennessee." East Tennessee Historical Society (No. 2, 1930): 22-23.

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Spring 1986

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The 1974 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the East Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Joseph L. Herndon, HABS Historian. The paper was edited by Susan McCown, HABS Architectural Historian in the Washington D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress. The photographs of the tavern were taken in February 1983 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS Staff Photographer.